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THE WORLD ACCORDING TO "STAR WARS"

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WEST: Good afternoon. I'm Darrell West, vice president of Governance Studies and director of the Center for Technology Innovation here at the Brookings Institution, and I would like to welcome you to this event on "The World According to 'Star Wars'". We're very pleased to welcome Cass Sunstein to Brookings, or I should say welcome him back because he is a nonresident senior fellow in our Governance Studies Program. But in his regular job he is the Robert Walmsley University professor at the Harvard Law School. He was an administrator in the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. You may see his columns in Bloomberg View. And many of you already know he is the author of many distinguished books, including one of my favorite books, "Nudge"; another book, "Simpler: The Future of Government"; and also a book that I used to use in my Media and Technology class at Brown University, "Republic.com". So what Cass is going to do today I believe is a reading from his book and then he will answer questions that you have. So, Cass Sunstein, welcome to Brookings.

MR. SUNSTEIN: So it's a complete thrill to be here, which is kind of back home. I spent many months working in an office upstairs, and this is a fantastic place in terms of both character and substance, so thanks to you all.

I'm pulling an audible here. I worked for many hours on slides, which are actually loaded and ready to go, but I'm going to do something very different and this is planned in the last 6 minutes. So it's with Darrell's nonveto, so if it doesn't work, blame him. I'll tell you why I'm doing it. There's a very specific reason. When I was first almost dating my wife, actually pre-dating her, we were texting -- not those kinds of texts, but texting. And we had a little exchange about an old Johnny Cash movie, actually not that old, the one with Reese Witherspoon, "Walk the Line," and we both loved that movie. And she asked me what was the best scene in the movie and I mentioned this scene. It's the scene where Johnny Cash -- and it's based on reality -- goes into Sam Phillips's studio. Sam Phillips is the great discoverer of the early Elvis Presley. And Johnny Cash auditions before the iconic Sam Phillips and sings a song. It's a kind of religious song that has resonance in the community and culture that's all around. And Sam Phillips, before Johnny Cash can finish the song, says, "Go home, you're not a singer." And Johnny Cash goes, "What are you talking about?" And he says, "You're not a singer. You're pretty good, but I can find dozens, hundreds of people who sing that song in that way. They're all good and you're one of them. Go

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home.” And then Cash looks completely crestfallen and then Sam Phillips says, “Okay, if you had to sing one song, one song that reflects your character and your soul, what you’re really about, before you turn into dust -- if you’re talking to God and you have to tell God something about you and your experience of the Earth, what song would you sing?” And then Johnny Cash sings “Folsom Prison Blues,” which is a song full of independence and Johnny Cash-ness and emotion and that’s the song he sings and the rest is history. I told Samantha a very short version of why that was the best song in the movie, best moment in the movie, and she responded with these words, “How’d you know that?” I think that meant she accepted my marriage proposal.

Well, I’m certainly not Johnny Cash, but what you were going to hear I think is the best version I could do of Johnny Cash’s original rejected song, and I’m not ashamed of it. If you want to hear it at some point, I’ll deliver it. It’s 36 slides. I worked really hard. But if I had to sing one song from this book, here you go.

There’s a scene from the genesis of the “Star Wars” saga in which Lawrence Kasdan who is a genius of screenwriting is discussing with George Lucas, the master of “Star Wars,” what’s going to happen in “Return of the Jedi” and miraculously the discussion was recorded in real time. It’s a clash of two Jedi Masters at the height of their powers. Kasdan: “I think you should kill Luke. Have Leia take over.” Lucas: “You don’t want to kill Luke.”

Kasdan: “Okay, then kill Yoda.”

Lucas: “I don’t want to kill Yoda. You don’t have to kill people. You’re a product of the 1980s. You don’t go around killing people. It’s not nice.”

Kasdan: “No, no. I’m not. I’m trying to give the story some kind of an edge to it.”

Lucas: “By killing somebody I think you alienate the audience.”

Kasdan: “I’m saying that the movie has more emotional weight if someone you love is lost along the way. The journey has more impact.”

Lucas: “I don’t like that and I don’t believe that.”

Those words, “I don’t like that and I don’t believe that,” I think are precious words and Lucas wins the argument by knockout. The words are precious because of the way they’re ordered, “not liking” precedes and helps account for “not believing.” If you don’t like something, you’re going to be

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inclined to disbelieve it. That's the psychologist's idea of motivated reasoning. I don't like what Kasdan says, and I don't believe it either.

From Isaiah 1:18: "Come now let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

From George Lucas: "He, my father, wanted me to go into his business. I said I'm absolutely not going to do it. He sold office equipment in a store. I said I will never go to work every day doing the same damn thing day in and day out."

My son, Declan, the Darth Vader fan to whom this book is dedicated, is now 7 years old, recently turned 7. Four years ago he was joined by a sister named Rian. Declan's really close to his mother and when Rian was born I had an acute kind of pain in my gut, which was that Declan would feel a threat and loss. A few weeks after Rian came home, I found myself singing my son a song from the depths of my unconscious that managed to be both idiotic and offensive, so prepare yourself. The song had just one line, sung over and over again, with a combination of giddy delight and utter certainty. "Daddies are for boys and mommies are for girls." Declan pretended to dislike it or at least to think that it was wrong. His response was to sing right back -- he's 4 years old at the time -- to the same tune, "Daddies are for girls and mommies are for boys." I responded by saying, "Declan, you must be very tired and all confused. You're singing the song wrong. Did you get enough sleep last night?" This is all true, by the way. This is not fiction. He came right back at me, "Daddy, you must be working too hard and all confused. You're singing the song wrong. Are you all right?" Whenever I came back from a business trip, and this continues to these days, I pick him right up and tell him, "Declan, this is completely amazing. You're not going to believe it. I was watching a news program in California and a commercial came on and there were these people and everyone started singing 'Daddies are for boys and mommies are for girls,' so it's true." And he would answer, "Daddy, while you were gone, I was watching a baseball game at home and a commercial came on and everyone started singing 'Daddies are for girls and mommies are for boys,' so you must be confused. Are you very tired?" Declan still pretends to dislike our song, but he's always known what it's really about. The song originally said you have a baby sister and she takes some of your mother's time, but your father is here for you. Its meaning is simpler now. I'm here for you. There's some evidence that he gets that. Whenever my wife and I are out late to dinner, he falls asleep

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in our bed. As I pick him up to carry him off to his room, I start whistling the insipid tune, which I haven't tortured you with. I start singing the insipid tune to a particular song. This happened by the way three days ago. He's sound asleep. But every time he hears the song, he smiles. Rian, his sister, is 4 years old now and she's heard the song in its two different versions countless times. Sometimes she sings with unbounded delight, "Daddies are for girls and mommies are for boys." Sometimes she sings with equivalent delight, "Daddies are for boys and mommies are for girls." Both versions are right. They're complementary, not contradictory. Rian's a smart kid and she knows exactly what she's talking about.

To every child, boy or girl, a father must seem at times to be a kind of Darth Vader -- tall, scary with a booming deep voice, insanely powerful, and at least potentially violent. For any child, boy or girl, a father is both Jedi and Sith -- Obi-Wan, gentle and calming and good; and Vader, fierce and terrifying. In the first trilogy, George Lucas was able to get quite primal about fathers and sons, and while his tale speaks to everyone, he's given some personal hints about why. His relationship with George Sr. was troubled, in some ways tortured, full of disappointments and mandates and prohibitions. As one of Lucas's interviews noted, George Sr. was known as a domineering businessman. And those who knew Lucas have always insisted that the tortured relationship between Darth Vader and Luke springs in many ways from Lucas's own relationship with his dad. "My father," Lucas said, "wanted me to go into the stationery business." Lucas said, "He was pretty much devastated when I refused to get involved in it." By all accounts their confrontations on the subject were turbulent and for a time they were estranged. It's worth pausing over that. Even if it's temporary, an estrangement between a parent and a child is extraordinarily painful, been there, done that. As Lucas put it matter-of-factly but with defiance, "At 18 we had this big break when he wanted me to go into the business and I refused." As his father himself later recalled, "I fought him. I didn't want him to get into that damn movie business." Even though George Sr. uttered those words decades later, can't you feel the fire? "Damn movie business." There were no light sabers, no one lost a hand, but every son yearns for his father's approval and it was hard for Lucas to get his. Lucas says movingly, recently, "You only have to accomplish one thing in life and that's to make your parents proud of you."

Referring to himself and Steven Spielberg, Lucas once noted, "Almost all of our films are about fathers and sons. I don't think you could look at any of our movies and not find that." That's quite a

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statement for someone who has done a wide range of movies and whose most famous scenes seem to deal with planets, spaceships, and droids. More personally and quite gently Lucas said, "Parents try as hard as they can to do the right thing. They aren't purposely out to get you. They don't want to be Darth Vader." Lucas himself was able to reconcile with his father, though it took years for them to come back together. Think about how much pain and understanding he packs into these words. "He lived to see me finally go from a worthless -- as he would call it -- late bloomer to actually being successful. I gave him the one thing every parent wants, to have your kid be safe and able to take care of himself. That was all he really wanted and that's what he got."

It's not irrelevant that after "Return of the Jedi" Lucas, really the most successful director in the world, retired from moviemaking and abandoned "Star Wars" for just one reason: he wanted to be a good father. Asked in 2015 just a few months ago by Charlie Rose -- I don't know how many of you saw it, what he wants the first line of his obituary to say -- and Rose asked it in a way that seemed very, you know, a lot of adulation for Lucas's impact on the culture. Lucas responded without missing even half a beat, "I was a great dad."

The first two trilogies, Lucas's half dozen, should be called the "Redemption of Anakin Skywalker." The redemption occurs as a result of intense attachment, otherwise known as love. That form of attachment is the entire reason Anakin slips to the Dark Side. It's why he falls. He can't bear to lose his beloved. Anakin's heart is what gets him into trouble. Attachment is also the reason for his choice to return to the light. He can't stand seeing his son die. In the end "Star Wars" insists that you can't be redeemed without attachment. That's the strongest message of the saga and it's what makes it speak to people's deepest selves. Here's the redemption scene itself.

Darth Vader -- I hope you remember this --

Darth Vader: "Luke, help me take this mask off."

Luke: "But you'll die."

Darth Vader: "Nothing can stop that now. Just for once, let me see you with my own eyes."

Now Anakin, the father, for the first time in the three scripts, he's called Anakin, not Darth Vader anymore.

Anakin: "Now go my son. Leave me."

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Luke: "No, you're coming with me. I'll not leave you here. I've got to save you."

Anakin: "You already have, Luke. You were right. You were right about me. Tell your sister you were right."

And he dies.

For a fairy tale, that's good. Actually, it's really good. It's even great. And a nice little bit from the novelization, 'the boy was good and the boy had come from him, so there must have been good in him, too. He smiled up again at his son and for the first time he loved him, and for the first time in many long years loved himself again as well.' One reason we love other people, isn't it, is that they help us to love ourselves?

The sheer quality of the dialogue here is a big upset. Lucas knows myth. He built the "Star Wars" movies on religions and myths of multiple kinds, and he has an almost unbelievable visual imagination. He knows a lot about republics and empires and why one turns into the other. But emotions aren't exactly his strong suit. While he enjoys editing, he doesn't really like working with people that much. In the prequels it's droids and more droids, droid armies everywhere, all droids, all the time. Harrison Ford famously told him, "You can type this shit, George, but you can't say it." He confesses that he struggles with dialogue. He said, "I think I'm a terrible writer." Once he admitted, "I'd be the first person to say, 'I can't write dialogue.' I don't particularly like dialogue, which is part of the problem." And as Harrison Ford said recently in an interview, "George isn't the best at dealing with those human situations, to say the least." But at the crucial moment in the original trilogy, Lucas delivered. He was the best at dealing with that particular human situation and he knew exactly what he was doing. He didn't trick anybody.

Lucas had a lot of sources for Luke's journey. His major one was Joseph Campbell's tale, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," by the way whose editor and discoverer was Jacqueline Bouvier at the time. That was her great achievement, it's her book. The whole series tracks Campbell's account, but the notion of a father sacrificing himself and repudiating the cause of his entire life and dying in order to save his son, that's Lucas's own. It's entirely original. That's what tops "I am your father."

The prequels, the underrated prequels, are ostensibly about one thing above all, the perils of attachment. In Anakin's words, "Attachment is forbidden. Possession is forbidden." And Yoda,

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“Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose. Of the Dark Side, despair is,” says Yoda, “the reason despair itself is attachment. It is a grip clenched upon pain.” That’s a good line about despair, isn’t it? It’s true. I think, by the way, there are three deadly sins. I’ll confess there are three that you can’t get to Heaven. And they are bullying, snark, and despair, probably in that order -- maybe despair jumps ahead of snark. The point here is plain, the kind of Buddhist and stoic message of “Star Wars.” If you’re attached to someone, you become vulnerable. Serene detachment is the only safe path because it prevents catastrophic choices. Luke nearly fails as a Jedi Knight because of his rage produced by Vader’s vow to pursue his sister. Anakin does fail as a Jedi because he is incapable of detachment. He is desperate to find a way to bring his loved ones back to life. As Luke puts it, “His undoing is that he loveth too much.” The Sith get their revenge because of Anakin’s fear of death, not his own, but of the people he loves. Anakin chooses disastrously as a result of that fear. This is the Buddhist and stoic influence on “Star Wars.” They make pleas for detachment and in emphasizing the perils associated with fear of loss, the “Star Wars” movies borrow directly from those traditions. But in “Return of the Jedi,” Anakin gets redeemed not by serenity and distance, but by their opposite. He chooses to kill the Emperor because he cannot bear to see his son die. So much for those silly stoics, chose that Anakin did.

There’s a point here about the political message of the movie where freedom of choice in individual life, which even the Sith respect, is mirrored by the plea for republican self-government as against the authoritarian Emperor. So if there’s one theme that belongs in the “Star Wars” pantheon with fatherhood and redemption, it is freedom of choice. That’s the Holy Trinity of the films.

Whatever Yoda said, Anakin is redeemed by fear of loss and by love, not detachment. And so he is when making the redemptive choice perfectly continuous with his earlier self, showing the very characteristics that led him to the Dark Side. When Lucas pressed that theme, the Force was unquestionably with him. In terms of narrative, that’s his finest moment.

The redemption of Anakin Skywalker transcends any individual’s personal struggles with a parent, a family member, or otherwise. Its real theme is universal: by their innocence and goodness, by their boundless capacity for forgiveness, and by the sheer power of their faith and hope, children redeem their parents, bringing out their best selves. Kids in the room whose parents are still alive know that. Parents in the room who have children, you already do, don’t you? And as every child knows deep in his



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or her heart, any parent will choose to sacrifice his life to save his kids even if it means a contest with the Emperor himself. When he makes that choice, the Force is going to be right there with him. I like that and I believe it. Thanks.

Questions? We can talk about anything you like -- separation of powers, authoritarianism -- the absence of a microphone we can talk about.

SPEAKER: (Off mic)

MR. SUNSTEIN: Okay, so the comment if you didn't hear it, Lucas gave up his baby to Disney. So Lucas's baby, they're human beings, not "Star Wars," so connected with the comments, yes, that his conception of his children is not about his product. His product going to Disney? I'm fine with that and there are a few reasons why I'm fine with that. Kathleen Kennedy is the head of Lucas Films. She worked closely with Lucas for many years. She will be true to the product I think. Lucas doesn't have an appetite evidently for doing more "Star Wars" movies and the world has an appetite for more "Star Wars" movies. And I'll tell you when "The Force Awakens" came out -- you've heard about my big daughter and my little daughter, and I hope this connects with universal experiences people have with family members over "Star Wars" -- but after "The Force Awakens" came out, I got a text message from my big daughter that said, "I burst into tears as soon as the music started. First time we didn't see it together." And the Lucas film owned by Disney did that and George Lucas didn't have an appetite. I think he completed his tale and the enduring character of the tale, I celebrate that.

SPEAKER: You made reference to the theme of the shift from -- or the transformation from republic to empire. That sort of cries for the question about what parallels you draw that can refer to the political situation?

MR. SUNSTEIN: So let's step back a little bit. The prequels, which most people hate or don't like, they took a big risk in the sense that they are as much about kind of political institutional shifts as they are a character study. Maybe that's partly because the actors didn't, let's say, deliver their best performances. Natalie Portman's a very good actress. This was not her shining moment. But Lucas studied actually the fall into authoritarianism of republics in some depth. And while I was researching the book, I just did a little work on Nazi Germany and I got a passage in The New York Times in the 1930s about the Legislature yielding its power to the executive; that is, Hitler; and it completely parallels what

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happens in the prequels. So I think it's on to something that does parallel some things that are happening in Europe and the United States, which is when you have a squabbling Legislature that's driven by partisan passions and not able to do stuff, there is a populist interest in a tough guy. And that is actually true and there's a happier version of it. Maybe we can see that as the Rooseveltian, which is under very difficult conditions, a strong leader is very important so long as he's genuinely accountable. But there are less happy versions, and I think it's fair to say there's no American political candidate who's a Sith Lord I'm here to announce. But it's fair to worry I think over whether at least one very prominent political candidate has the background of respect for institutions let's say, which have helped the United States thrive and whether some of his supporters maybe are more enthusiastic about the idea of strength and action than about republican processes, let's call it, which is a longwinded way of saying that Lucas is onto something and we're seeing it.

SPEAKER: I'm Garrett Mitchell and I write The Mitchell Report. I watched your interview with Charlie Rose and he asked you the question, "Can you understand Lucas's work if you don't understand his relationship with his father?" and you know how you responded to that. But he was trying to get at the centrality of Lucas's relationship with his father and how that ultimately gave birth to "Star Wars." And what I'm interested in is what explains your fascination with this? This didn't come out of nowhere. And related to that, having read two of your books and being pretty familiar with the subject matter of the other 14 or whatever it is, it's safe to say that this one is outside the box. But I wonder to what extent you see it as being related to the box, if you will? So it's a two-part question. What drew you to this? What's the draw for you? What do you see there? And how does this relate to the kinds of things that Cass Sunstein has been thinking about and writing about?

MR. SUNSTEIN: Great. Thanks for that. So if you told me two years ago that I would do a book about "Star Wars," I think it was more likely that I was playing professional hockey and a Stanley Cup winner. And since I barely skate, that shows you the improbability. There's one thing personal that happened. There's another thing intellectual that happened. So my little boy to whom the book is dedicated is a big baseball fan. He got hooked by "Star Wars" at age 5, and this was completely unexpected. So we watched them together over and over again. And then seeing them over and over again, I got intrigued by two questions, neither of which I've discussed. One is how did George Lucas

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come up with this stuff, and the other is why did the saga become the defining one of our time? And as I studied just in a kind of, you know, between 9:00 and 10:30 at night on the Kindle way to answer the first question, I learned that the tale that many people believe, which is that Lucas had it all planned in his head from early on and just unspooled what was in his head, is quite false. There's a lot of serendipitous bursts of creativity where he would decide at a certain stage, relatively late, that Vader was Luke's dad and the tale that Darth Vader is Dark Father, not true. Darth Vader had that name and was a minor character when Luke was kind of an old guy in the original scripts. And the idea that he knew that Luke and Leia were siblings, well, those romantic kisses, which are very charged, it's not that kind of movie. So it was all shifting around in his head.

Then I thought that's like law, so constitutional law is about episode generation, just as a descriptive matter. So you have a case involving abortion or affirmative action or campaign finance. There are prior episodes and you can't treat them as if they were some dream or to be ignored. They're real. They're binding unless you're going to overrule them, which you're probably not going to do. And then you have to make best sense of them. So then it seemed to me that there are "I am your father" moments all over our legal system. The same-sex marriage decision is an "I am your father" moment. Now what I mean about that is that it casts previous episodes, let's say, in an altogether new light. So we have a sense of what our equality principles are about now that is very, very different from what we had before. It's both a reversal of what people had long thought that produces a sense of "oh my God," but also produces evidently in our culture a sense of "of course," which is what "I am your father" moments do. There's an "oh my God" and there's an "of course." In the legal system, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the great school segregation case, that's an "I am your father" moment. We take it now as part of the inevitable backdrop, but there is nothing inevitable about it. It was very sharply contested at the time and ten years before, merely ten years before, 1944, the idea that the Supreme Court would unanimously strike down school segregation in the United States? Pretty, let's say, imaginative stuff. So the idea that we have a robust free speech principle of the sort we have now that everyone thinks came out of James Madison or Alexander Hamilton, no. That's new episodes and it's relatively recent episodes. It was basically, roughly 200 years from the founding that we got a robust free speech principle, a little less than 200 years, 180, 190 years. Then the narrative makes sense. It seems to. But

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it was punctuated by fresh bursts of the George Lucas kind. So to see constitutional law as episodes that have unanticipated “oh my Gods,” that seemed to me extremely interesting and captures something about our legal tradition from a new light.

Now if you think of our political tradition, it's the same thing. The idea that we would have a president whose middle name is Hussein, who is African-American, who would have thought that that would be possible in let's say 2003? I was a colleague of the current president and I thought he was so amazing even then that he should be president, but he wasn't doing so well in the polls even at a relatively late stage, and now it's part of our unfolding narrative, isn't it? And whether you like him or not, it's kind of a central piece of our narrative and that's all over America. So John Dewey said, “Be the problems what they may, the experiment is not played out. The United States are not an established fact to be categorically assessed” and something about the unfolding nature. Then it occurred to me, that's what individual lives are like. So what you're doing right now probably, either in your professional or personal life, is a product of some things that happened. Who would have thought that those things would have happened and you are where you are, that you're married to the person or with the person you would be with? And that's George Lucas's life, by the way, has plenty of that. The arc of Star Wars has plenty of that. That intrigued me. By the way, the reason I wrote the book, the real reason that I wrote the book, is I happened to be at a dinner party one night about a year and a half ago. Someone at the dinner happened to look on the right of her dinner table and “A New Hope” happened to be sitting out there, the compact disc. She happened to say, “You have a little boy, don't you?” I said, “Yes.” She happened to say, “Show the movie to your little boy.” Having thought that was the worst idea in the world, I happened to decide, just out of kind of not wanting to be a jerk, to show 5 minutes to him. He liked them. And no book without that, and there are ways large and small that that's all around us. So the idea of serendipity and patterns after the fact that we see as inevitable that is what gripped me.

By the way, “Star Wars” itself, the studio had no faith in it. Harrison Ford thought it was ridiculous. So did the other actors. They didn't make enough celluloid prints to meet the initial demand. They showed it to the studio. Not only did no one applaud, no one even smiled. That's a movie that's made -- that's a franchise now, which has made \$30 billion plus, which is more than about half of the world's nations' GDP. And we're talking about a film, which with the exception of “Gone with the Wind” is

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the biggest earner in inflation-adjusted terms in the history of movies. And "Gone with the Wind," if you adjust for time in era, "A New Hope" crushes "Gone with the Wind."

SPEAKER: (Off mic) or read that when the initial concept (off mic) in the back of Lucas's mind it was the early 1970s. The Vietnam War was winding down, Watergate had happened, and he was very much a Baby Boomer obviously. And that initially his thought or concept was that the empire was almost more like the United States in terms of how we were going into Vietnam. You had the Vietcong, the primitive rebels, trying to fight back for their own self-determination. But by the time the movie came out in 1977 and the sequel in 1980 and the third one in 1983, it's Reagan's America in that the audiences identified with the rebels and that the evil empire was the Soviet Union. Can you speak to any of that?

MR. SUNSTEIN: Yeah. The first part Lucas has owned up to. Without feeling it was a mistake in any way, he just said he designed this thinking that Nixon was going for a third term and the United States might become an empire and that the Vietcong were the rebels. He said stuff like that. And you could say that in the Reagan era, the idea of the Soviet Union as the evil empire, there's a cultural resonance that had a lot to do with that. And Reagan did use the words, "evil empire," and I think it's not crazy to say that those had something to do with the fact that "Star Wars" had permeated our culture.

My view is that the identification of the United States at any point in our history with the Empire as depicted in the "Star Wars" is a catastrophic misunderstanding of our beloved country. So that political view that seems to have animated the original movies I do not share. But what Lucas achieved is a kind of universality in the depiction of rebellion against an oppressive authoritarian regime that outruns any specific understanding of what that should be mapped onto.

So that's part of, I think, the greatness of what he did just as his own -- as we discussed before, you don't need to know anything about George Lucas's struggles with his father to recognize the lived reality for many people, often in much milder form, of this tension between father and son. So you don't have to accept any particular politics to love the movies and to find their politics resonant. So in 2015 December I was talking to a pretty high level, quite high level Russian official just at an event at a time when there was very acute tension between the United States and Russia. And this conversation didn't have the ease that you'd like at a December party, but I happened to mention that I was working on

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a book on "Star Wars." And the Russian official, he just changed. He became a 12 year old boy. And he said, "Oh, in my country we love 'Star Wars.'" Now what kind of political meaning "Star Wars" has in Putin's Russia, who knows? But that doesn't really matter. What matters is the idea of an authority who is oppressing, that's what it gets.

SPEAKER: Thank you. I want to bring the other "Star" big saga in the picture, "Star Trek." You've written about it in the book. You've drawn some parallels. They cannot be compared. But as I was reading your book, what really struck me was the fact that "Star Wars" -- and I learned to like "Star Wars" -- it made me question why did I never like "Star Wars?" And it was about the fact that I grew up in a part of the world, very close to Russia, and the history that I learned was all about wars, all about struggles. And, yes, you have the struggle, the inner struggle, the hero's journey, but you also live in a larger construct, the society you live in and the history so far is nothing like the world of "Star Trek" and is everything like the world of "Star Wars." So this idea that -- so as I was reading your book it made me realize that "Star Wars" is about the world today, the world that we have lived as humanity so far, but what I loved about "Star Trek" was that world of the future, sort of having that guiding light. Because whichever Force wins, the light or the dark, that's the kind of world we're going to create in the future. So I just wanted to see your thoughts, if you are looking at "Star Trek" from the larger picture.

MR. SUNSTEIN: That's great. So I will out myself as a lifelong "Star Trek" devotee who is a recent convert to "Star Wars." And I think you get at part of the reason that "Star Trek" depicts an idealized future that has a lot of novel-like drama in it. It's not like a "Flash Gordon" or a kid's war thing and "Star Wars" is kind of like a kid's war movie. That's what it grew out of. It's visually out of this world, literally, and in terms of creativity, "Star Wars" is, but "Star Trek" is more like a novelist's creation. I think what many of the best "Star Trek" episodes and to be talking about Brookings, about "Star Trek" and "Star Wars," I'm acutely aware that this is summertime. But "Star Trek" does have at its best a sense of gender and race and economic stuff that is good. At its worse on gender it's pretty bad, but at its best it's really good. And on race it's kind of generally I think very good, very conscious of that. And it doesn't have the constant warring. It has more narrative and psychological stuff going on. "Star Wars" does also, but it's not on the surface.

SPEAKER: Thank you. This is very interesting. I want to ask particularly about "Attack

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of the Clones” as kind of a -- this may be a stretch, of course -- but as a kind of Iraq War metaphor because in many ways it’s not like the original film that were largely black and white to some degree. But there’s a sense of like corporate greed and government collusion and a sense that nothing is right. The entire war is a lie and things are not what they should be in a republic. Can you talk a little about that?

MR. SUNSTEIN: Yes, that’s extremely interesting. So when I think of “Attack of the Clones” I think of the opening scene and the whooshing and the ships going in various ways that’s whoa, so your point is better. It’s less childish than my “whoa.” So you’re thinking that this is a play on the Iraq War because everyone’s kind of colluding in a conspiracy-like way. I think that’s a reasonable way to think of it. Whether that’s the best way to think -- I’d want to think more, so it’d be a little more general. The “Star Wars” movies can be understood in multiple different ways. That’s part of their charm. So to see them as essentially a tale about the vulnerability of republics to machinations that lead them to fall that’s fair. To see them as an essentially Christian tale about how souls get saved, I think that’s really fair. To see them as a Freudian story about boys who are in love with their mothers, I think that’s completely fair. Anakin has a problem there and patricide is a constant theme, so there are strong Freudian themes. This one may be an outlier in that sense and you can connect it with some of Lucas’s - - you know, he has a rebel’s heart, so there’s a little bit in Lucas of the great scene in I think it was the “Wild Bunch” where the lead character was asked, “What are you rebelling against?” And Marlon Brando I think it was and he said, “What do you got?” And Lucas is a little like that. So I think that is a fair reading of “Attack of the Clones.”

So I’d say just for myself to see “Attack of the Clones” as a kind of Bernie Sanders movie, I would resist that even if the elements are there. Not only on the grounds, I will confess, that Senator Sanders has many admirable qualities. He’s not my top choice for the next President of the United States, but not only because of that, but also because I think these are not narrowly political movies in that sense and that in a way reduces their greatness I think to see them that way. And I’ll tell you what I’m doing now. What one of the reviewers of “The Force Awakens” said is that J.J. Abrams, the principle person behind “The Force Awakens” is a critic, meaning he is analyzing what came before in a way that is very much like what a critic does. An episode writer is like that. He has to interpret the prior ones in a way that’s like using a critical facility. And to see “Attack of the Clones” in the way you’re doing I think is

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not unfaithful to it, but I prefer to see "Attack of the Clones" as more abstractly about, in a more Jeffersonian way, about the need for citizen vigilance.

SPEAKER: So when I was watching "The Force Awakens" several times in theaters, it dawned on me how similar it was in sort of narrative scope to "A New Hope" in that you have kind of the hero from the far-flung desert planet and the cocky pilot and the death of a mentor and destruction of a starbase and all that. I was wondering your thoughts on that decision to kind of sort of emulate that film essentially for maybe a new generation and whether or not it was a palate cleanser from the less favorably-received prequels or if it's a reset button for kind of the launch into sort of the next chapter and maybe sort of where you'd like to see Kennedy take the series in the future.

MR. SUNSTEIN: So there are a couple of different ways to see "The Force Awakens." We should step back a little bit and think -- I'll get to that, but it's closely related I think to this question -- why did "Star Wars" become the defining saga of our time? And there's one explanation, which is that "A New Hope" hit the zeitgeist. It just had a cultural resonance. And an account of that kind is very easy to make plausible. And what seems to me to be interesting about an account of that kind is that it can be said about Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Apple, professional football, Taylor Swift, anything that succeeds hits the culture right at the time. I think explanations of that kind are highly speculative and they have a fairy tale quality even though they seem completely convincing. And the reason is, if "A New Hope" succeeded in 1956 or 1966 or 1986 or 1996 or 2006, we could give exactly the same zeitgeist-type explanation.

Then there's another view, which is that the reason it succeeded so well is that it hit a social network that was very avid and that got bigger and bigger and bigger and then made it explode. I think those are usually the better explanations, social network explanations, than zeitgeist explanations.

Over to "The Force Awakens," "The Force Awakens" had a social network that was ready to explode, so its success was almost guaranteed by the music and the color of the letters. To make that fail, the first one at least would be really hard, given the social dynamics that were present. In terms of the choice -- I agree with you, it's a rerun of "A New Hope" -- here are two ways to look at it. The harsh way, which some smart people have suggested and not unfairly is that it was safe in a way that was not true to Lucas's own immense bravery even in the prequels, he went places where he hadn't gone before.



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And "Return of the Jedi" repeats a little bit of "A New Hope," but this guy is not thinking so much about the audience or at least his own creative, where do the juices flow best. You could see "The Force Awakens" as the choice that is bound to succeed. Now I have a little -- but it's not brave or anything that deserves a bow. It's more respectful applause. I'm prepared to stand and cheer for "The Force Awakens" even with its repetitious quality. And the reason is to pull off integration of new characters with old characters with a kind of fidelity to I think the deep patterns of the original saga -- and I said a few things about them, redemption, freedom of choice, attachment and such -- that's really hard. And to make it happen in a way that doesn't have anything where you squirm and think why am I watching this movie, it moves fast. Lawrence Kasdan was asked why does "Star Wars" work? He said, "It moves like a son of a bitch." And he wanted it to move like a son of a bitch. So I think it all worked. The only thing I really reject in "The Force Awakens" is -- spoiler alert -- the death of Han Solo. And what is so cool about this is I had a draft of the book done before "The Force Awakens" and I had found that passage you heard. It's a really obscure passage. It's in some book somewhere that almost no one reads those pages and I thought Kasdan himself surely doesn't even remember this. But in some interview a few months ago he said, "I always wanted somebody to die. I wanted someone to die. I tried and Lucas wouldn't let me kill anybody. Finally I killed Han Solo." Now the very friend who showed me "A New Hope" -- I went to the movie with her among others. After the movie she spent 10 minutes in the bathroom crying and she said, "I'm done. I'm not seeing any of these movies again." And I'm going to see every one, but with reverence and respect, Mr. Kasdan -- wrong choice. I don't like what he did, and I hate the fact that I have to believe it.

MR. WEST: One more question.

SPEAKER: Yes, Professor, I was wondering if you had any particular thoughts about the political relevance between "Star Wars" and "Atlas Shrugged", whether there is any connection as far as the overall objectives and goals of those books.

MR. SUNSTEIN: Well, I think on one dimension, yeah. I know "Atlas Shrugged" pretty well. I had a period as an Ayn Rand person a long, long time ago. Everyone should. But Ayn Rand, like George Lucas, has a rebel's heart. They don't like authority. They like freedom. So this is another one. Both rebel's heart and Lucas is a freedom of choice kind of a guy, as is Ayn Rand. But Whittaker

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Chambers reviewed "Atlas Shrugged" in the National Review and he wrote kind of famously, on every page roughly you could hear the words, "To the gas chamber, go," which is I think too harsh and Rand was not by any means a fan of the gas chamber. But there's a kind of sensibility in Ayn Rand that is unforgiving and very harsh, which is I think the opposite of Lucas who has a kind of gentle -- even to think of it as forgiving is a little less gentle than he is because Lucas doesn't forgive Darth Vader, doesn't even get there, just loves him. It's his father. And that's how Lucas is in touch with the Dark Side in a kind of human and a little bit sexual and kind of ecstatic way. Good for him. We all should be. But Ayn Rand has a kind of, you know, Manichean -- that's the way to put it -- Ayn Rand has a Manichean view of humanity. You're a producer or you're a parasite. She had more vivid words even than parasite and Lucas just doesn't see it that way. The worst person in the galaxy, Darth Vader, is capable of the best redemptive choice. The best person in the galaxy, Luke, goes dark at a key moment, almost kills his father and he's dark. So I see the direction of the question and I see some commonalities, but what I love about George Lucas -- and the word love is the right one here and I didn't expect this, a "Star Trek" guy you're listening to -- is that he is the opposite of a Manichean. And he also described his -- he said about his own movies, he said, "The characteristic that defines my own movies is effervescent giddiness." And he said, "That's very strange because I'm not at all like that as a person." I've talked to him once at length, not about "Star Wars." He's a very intense present person. There's no effervescent giddiness at least in a casual conversation. His movies are full of it. "Atlas Shrugged" doesn't have even a glimmer of effervescent giddiness, and I think the effervescent giddiness is actually connected with the non-Manichean preforgiveness view; whereas in "Atlas Shrugged" it's kind of -- a lot of humanity is essentially unforgivable.

And so I think I'd like to say that George Lucas is made in America, and Ayn Rand for all her skills and, salutes to her for many things, I don't recognize "Atlas Shrugged" as an American novel. It's a different kind of novel.

(Audio Ends)

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